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SUBJECT: Preaching and Practicing -- Fujian Churches
Expand Role to Fill Social Service Gaps

(U) Classified by Consul General Robert Goldberg for
reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Officially registered churches in Fujian Province are growing steadily, with a demographic shift toward younger, urban, educated and more affluent members. In the wake of the economic downturn and gaps left in the government's social safety net, many churches are launching social programs, including dozens of elder care homes, education programs for children and youth, and programs for deaf gang members. The government is permitting more foreign organizations and churches to direct funds and volunteers towards social welfare efforts like the 2008 Sichuan earthquake relief. Church leaders attribute an improving relationship with government officials, and positive media coverage, in part to the visibility of these social welfare efforts. They view their mission broadly as serving society while helping to "raise moral standards" in China in the midst of great social change.

Growing in Number and Visibility

12. (C) Christianity is increasingly viewed as a positive force in society, especially as churches expand services to the poor in the slowing economy, according to leaders among the officially registered protestant church in Fujian. Fujian already has a sizeable Christian population, with 4,000 congregations and 850,000 total members in the government-registered church, ranking sixth among provinces in China, according to Rev. James Yang, head of the Fujian Christian Council based in Fuzhou. Many of the new members are students or university educated professionals, particularly in urban Fuzhou and Xiamen. Rev. Timothy Hao, pastor of the historic Trinity Church in Xiamen, confirmed this trend, and estimated there were 50,000 Christians in Xiamen alone, with five new churches in the booming suburban areas, plus a church that targets young members near Xiamen University.

13. (C) This trend is consistent with urban church growth across much of China, according to Fuzhou businessman and church elder, Zheng Tianyi. Fuzhou churches are becoming younger with more educated people. These people typically "don't already have a religion" and therefore are increasingly open to Christianity, which according to church leaders is now viewed by many people as having historic roots in China. Zheng added that many new members are business leaders and, therefore, have "higher social

positions" in the community. This demographic group networks in influential circles, and with greater numbers of people, naturally expanding interest in the work of the church.

Filling the Gap -- Social Services to the Elderly

14. (C) Rapid church growth in part stems from a growing desire by many young and educated Chinese to make a difference in society by caring more for the poor, according to Yang and Zheng. As churches launch social ministries to fill gaps not covered by government funding, they attract more urban professionals. But this is not a new phenomenon. "Fujian churches have a long history of social activism," starting with the early foreign mission schools, hospitals, and youth organizations such as the YMCA in the late 1800s, explained Yang. He sees the church rediscovering its history in China and gaining an infusion of youth and energy in the process.

15. (C) The recent trend started in 1998, when churches gained more freedom to expand activities beyond traditional Sunday worship services. Fujian churches have focused their greatest social efforts on elder care, having built dozens of new retirement homes financed and managed by congregations. Yang explained that there is an acute need for elder care all across China, largely because of the migration of so many younger workers to other provinces, leaving elderly parents alone and sometimes destitute. In Fujian, most congregations now have some involvement in

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supporting an elder care facility.

16. (C) A pastor of a 600-member congregation in a poorer rural community outside of Xiamen sees this trend extending far beyond the wealthier urban congregations and described her own church's work as multifaceted. Their main focus is on retirement care, with plans to expand their current facility to a 500-resident home, built with member donations on government-provided land. But she said churches need creative approaches, and her church has started a profit-generating kindergarten, which not only serves the community but also generates fees to underwrite the expenses of the retirement home.

17. (C) Dr. Peter Yue, Professor at the Fujian Theological Seminary, said that seminaries are changing too by preparing pastors for a much broader role in the community. His course on "Social Activism and Responsibility" teaches future pastors how to launch social ministries and mobilize volunteers. "We feel we are doing a much better job at charitable work" (compared with government run programs), said Yue when pressed on the point. For instance, in retirement homes "our volunteers care for the elderly like they are our own parents," a highly-prized value in Chinese culture. Many of the regular volunteers in these homes are themselves retirees, an abundant resource since China's mandatory retirement age is set at 55. Yue noted with obvious pride that out of 13 church-run retirement homes in the Fuzhou area, two had qualified as national pilot projects, a prestigious recognition from the national government and seen as encouragement to the churches to expand further into this role.

Younger Volunteers -- a Focus on Youth and Children

18. (C) Zheng, the 40 year old business leader, also noted a major shift in the overall demographic of volunteers and donors. In the past charitable workers and donors were the "old Christians" from long-time Christian families, but today they come from "the whole spectrum." Much of the funding today comes from younger and more educated members and leaders. To this group, supporting needs of children

and youth, and education "is a priority," and Zheng, with a long list of investment companies on his business card, reflects this trend. Zheng started a foundation to raise scholarship funds for university and seminary students, not only to strengthen the church "but also society as a whole." Rev. Yang acknowledged some healthy friction exists in many congregations between the older, traditional members and the younger, upstart entrepreneurial leaders eager to see change.

¶9. (C) The Sichuan earthquake in 2008 was a major turning point in overall attitude of the Fujian church toward outreach, and an unexpected catalyst toward more aggressively expanding social services, especially with younger volunteers and donors. After the earthquake, congregations in Fuzhou responded quickly with direct donations of construction materials for rebuilding efforts, all distributed through the Sichuan Christian Council. Yang pointed out that churches "wanted to continue benefiting children in Sichuan at the most basic levels," and now continue funding school uniforms and paying school fees for poor Sichuan children. He said that because of their network through the registered churches and the Christian Council in Sichuan, they can do this "more effectively." He didn't elaborate but Yang may have been contrasting their efforts to those of the underground churches, which lack such networks.

Reaching Out to the Deaf Community

¶10. (C) Beyond work with the elderly and youth, the church in Fujian has an unusual outreach program for the deaf. Started in 2004 by a handful of volunteers in Xiamen cooperating with churches in Zhejiang Province, the program now employs several staff members. Their goal is to keep deaf and mute persons, often social outcasts in China

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consigned to low paying, low status jobs, from joining criminal gangs for survival and ultimately "to spread the love of God among the 33 million deaf and mute people in China." Two deaf staff members told us through translated sign language that the program "rescued" them from organized gangs that required them to steal up to RMB 500 (about USD 75) per day or face beatings from gang leaders. The organization gives employment guidance, and assists with housing and other basic needs. Staff members said 300 deaf persons in Fujian are now part of their own mini-congregation, many of whom are former gang members. They noted that the local Public Security Bureau was extremely supportive, even though the organization had difficulty registering officially.

Greater Foreign Funding and Participation

¶11. (C) Fujian churches are cautious about receiving funds from foreign sources, which is consistent with the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) principle of self-support for registered churches. But in recent months, especially following the earthquake, business leaders such as Zheng are more aggressively soliciting funds from businesses and churches abroad. Over the past few years the government has, according to Zheng, relaxed its policy to allow foreign-source donations, so long as the gifts are given without conditions.

¶12. (C) Foreign donations can be sizeable. Donors in Singapore recently gave the Fujian church RMB 6.5 million (USD 950,000) toward scholarships and children's school fees, as well as other support. However, the routing of funds still includes a government link. Foreign donors deposit funds in a government account, and churches in turn distribute the funds to the needy as they see fit. But Rev. Yang called this trend a "very good signal that

perhaps in the future this can be done directly" without government involvement. Yang was visibly heartened by the increasing level of trust and growing global network of relationships with churches overseas. These relationships encourage and build credibility, which Yang anticipates could also lead to more funding. (Note: The Amity Foundation is the official charitable arm of the national China Christian Council and regularly receives funds from overseas donors. However, church leaders in Fujian say their charitable work and goals are not connected to larger Amity projects. Their only real contact with Amity is for the purchase of Bibles and Christian literature printed legally in China. End note.)

¶13. (C) Not all foreign aid is financial. Fujian churches also host overseas volunteer groups, mainly to provide informal English classes but also for more specialized services, such as assisting in medical clinics. The pastor of the rural congregation outside of Xiamen said that several volunteer medical groups from churches in the United States had volunteered for 2-3 weeks at a time in their church-run clinic, providing free services to migrants and the poor. She expects these visits to continue and even expand.

Gaining Favor with Local Officials and Media

¶14. (C) Church leaders are clear that their motives for service are an outgrowth of their religious faith. But they all acknowledged that social service programs heighten the credibility of the church overall in the eyes of government officials and felt their relationship with Fujian officials was steadily improving as a result. At the very outset of our meeting, Rev. Yang, as the top church official in Fujian, emphasized that Fujian churches are established and operate in full compliance with government policy. He said there was a constructive relationship between Fujian churches and local government and party officials, and even cited his membership in the Fuzhou People's Political Consultative Conference as a critical "bridge" that helps Fujian government leaders understand and accept the goals of the church.

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¶15. (C) Yang also invited to our meeting a reporter from an official newspaper in Fuzhou that publishes a regular column on religious organizations, and was careful to praise the policy of religious freedom in China. But Yang complained that in the not-distant past the church's work seemed "invisible" to officials and especially the media. In the last few years, media reports have been more frequent and more positive, which Yang feels reinforces the image of the church as an important contributor to the larger community. As an example, television media recently covered a large blood drive at a local church, and a newspaper covered the church's program assisting 100 children whose parents are incarcerated, and who receive no government support. Yang somewhat effusively spoke of the "trust" relationship with the government, but then qualified this by saying the church would always "do first what the Bible teaches and what God calls them to do."

Not Aimed at Evangelizing

¶16. (C) Church leaders state that their motives are not to evangelize, nor do their social services exclude non-Christians. But, as Rev. Yang points out, the church's programs do not hide their beliefs or faith-based motivations. For example, retirement homes will usually host regular Christian worship services, to which all are invited. Yang said that many of the residents eventually embrace Christian faith, but there is "no pressure." Rev. Yang emphasized that apart from all the social programs,

"raising the moral standards as China is changing is the major role of religion in our society." He sees this as a goal the government not only accepts, but also encourages.

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